



The League of Nations

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BY

VISCOUNT GREY

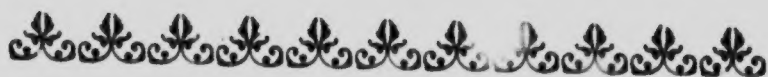
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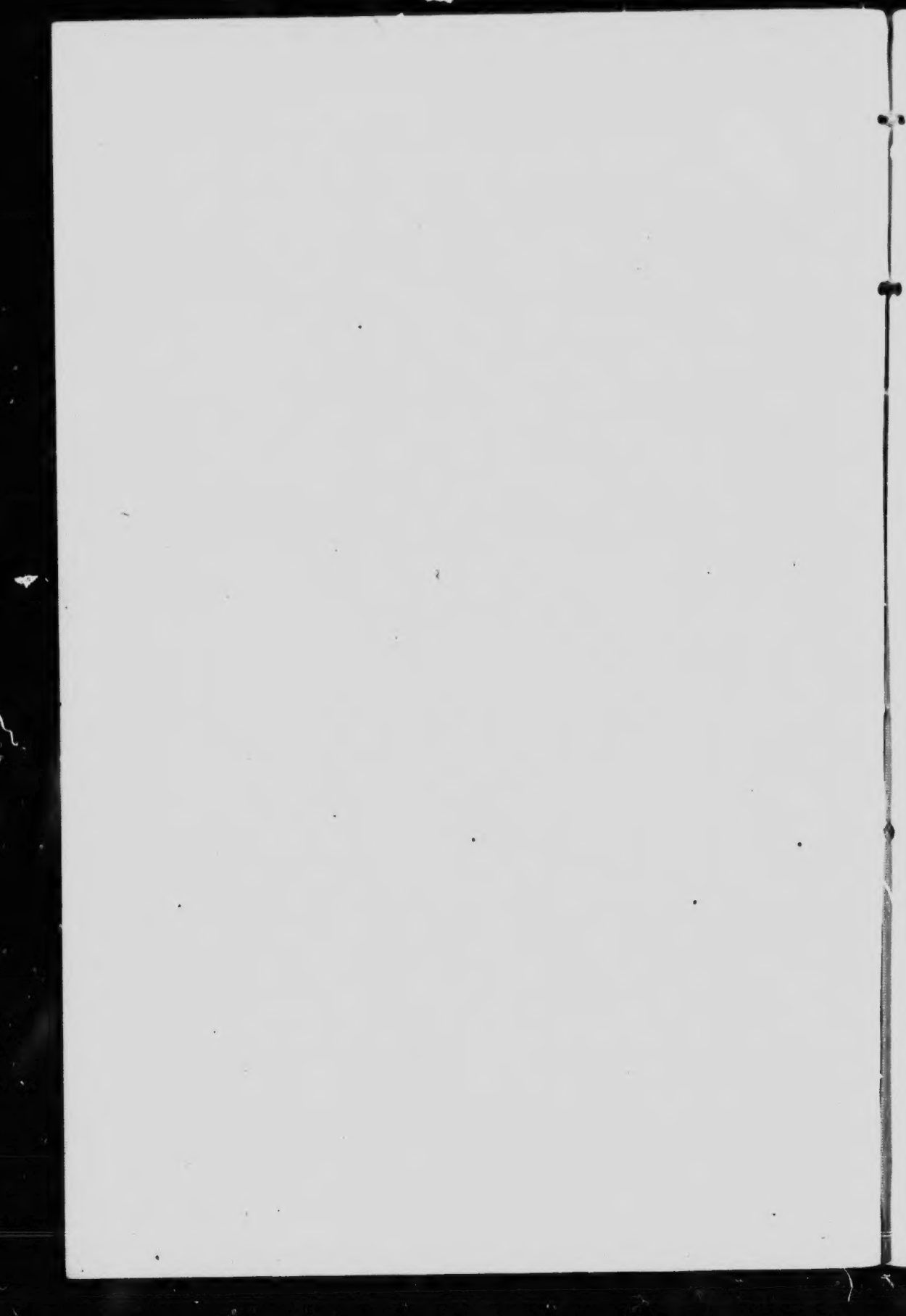
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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

THERE are projects that exist in a shadowy form in an atmosphere of tepid idealism, admired by those who see that if possible they would be desirable. From time to time an attempt is made to embody them in material form and make them of practical use in national or international politics. It is then discovered that what appeared as an ideal to be wholly desirable and amiable cannot be of practical use, unless we are ready to subject ourselves to some limitations or discipline that may be inconvenient, and unless we are prepared to overcome some difficulties that were not at first sight apparent. The ideal is found to have in fact a stern and disagreeable as well as an easy and amiable side to it. Thereupon a storm beats against it; those who never thought it desirable—for there are intellects to which most ideals seem dangerous and temperaments to which they are offensive—and who had previously treated it only with contempt in the abstract, offer the fiercest opposition to it as a practical proposal: many of its supporters are paralysed by the difficult aspects of it, which they had not previously considered, and the

project recedes again into the region of shadows or abstract resolutions.

This, or something like this, has hitherto been the history of the ideal that has now become associated with the phrase 'A League of Nations'; but it does not follow that the history of this or of other ideals will be the same after the war as before it. There is more at stake in this war than the existence of individual States or Empires, or the fate of a Continent; the whole of modern civilization is at stake, and whether it will perish and be submerged, as has happened to previous civilizations of older types, or whether it will live and progress, depends upon whether the nations engaged in this war, and even those that are onlookers, learn the lessons that the experience of the war may teach them. It must be with nations as with individuals; in the great trials of life they must become better or worse—they cannot stand still. They must learn and profit by experience and rise to greater heights, or else sink lower and drop eventually into the abyss. And this war is the greatest trial of which there is any record in history. If the war does not teach mankind new lessons that will so dominate the thought and feeling of those who survive it, and those who succeed the survivors, as to make new things possible, then the war will be the greatest catastrophe as well as the most grievous trial and suffering of which mankind has any record.

Therefore it does not follow that a League of Nations to secure the peace of the world will remain impossible because it has not been possible hitherto, and I propose in this paper to consider shortly, to state rather than to examine (for it would take a long time to examine thoroughly) the conditions that have not been present before and that are present now, or may soon be present, and that are essential if the League of Nations is to become effective. These conditions appear to me to be as follows :

1. The idea must be adopted with earnestness and conviction by the Executive Heads of States. It must become an essential part of their practical policy, one of their chief reasons for being or continuing to be responsible for the policy of their States. They must not adopt it only to render lip service to other persons, whom it is inconvenient or ungracious to displease. They must lead, and not follow; they must compel if necessary, and not be compelled.

This condition was not present before the war; to what extent is it present now? It is not possible to answer this question fully, but it can be answered certainly and affirmatively as regards President Wilson, the Executive Head of the United States, and this alone is sufficient to give new life and purpose to the idea of a League of Nations. President Wilson and his country have had in this matter the great advantage of having been for more than two

years and a half, before April 1917, able to observe the war as neutrals, free from the intense anxiety and effort that absorb all the thought and energy of belligerents. They were able not only to observe, but to reflect and to draw conclusions. One of the conclusions has been that, if the world of which they form an important part is to be saved from what they consider disaster, they must enter the war against Germany; another has been that, if national liberty and peace are to be secure in future, there must be a League of Nations to secure them. It must not be supposed from this that the Governments of the Allies are less ready to draw, or have not already drawn, the same conclusion from the experience of the war; but their countries have been at war all the time. They have been fighting, it is true, for the same ideal of national and human liberty as the United States, but fighting also for the immediate preservation of national existence in Europe, and all their thought and energy have been concentrated upon resistance to imminent peril. Nevertheless, in this country at any rate, the project of a League of Nations has met with widespread and cordial acceptance. On the other hand, the Military party in Germany are, and must remain, opposed to it; they resent any limitation upon the use of force by Germany as fatal to German interests, for they can conceive no development, and even no security, except one based solely upon force. Any

other conception is fatal, and this exclusive conception is essential to the maintenance of the power of the military party in Germany. As long, therefore, as this rule in Germany continues, Germany will oppose a League of Nations. Nothing will change this except a conviction in the German people that the use of force causes at least as much suffering to themselves as to others, and that security based upon law and treaty and a sense of mutual advantage is better than the risks, dangers, and sufferings of a will to supreme power and efforts to obtain it; and this conviction must so work upon them as to displace the military party and their policy and ideals from power in Germany.

The situation, therefore, of this first condition essential to make the League of Nations practical may be summed up as follows: It is present certainly as regards the Executive Head of the United States, which is potentially the strongest and actually the least exhausted of all the belligerent States: it either is or will at the end of the war be found to be present as regards the Governments of other countries fighting on the same side as the United States. Even among their enemies Austria has publicly shown a disposition to accept the proposal, and probably welcomes it genuinely though secretly as a safeguard for her future, not only against old enemies, but against Prussian domination.

All small States, belligerent or neutral, must

naturally desire in their own interest everything that will safeguard small States as well as great from aggression and war.

There remains the opposition of Germany, where recent military success and the ascendancy of Prussian militarism have reduced the advocates of anything but force to silence. Germany has to be convinced that force does not pay, that the aims and policy of her military rulers inflict intolerable and also unnecessary suffering upon her; and that when the world is free from the menace of these military rulers, with their sharp swords, shining armour, and mailed fists, Germany will find peaceful development assured and preferable to expansion by war, and will realize that the condition of true security for one nation is a sense of security on the part of all nations. Till Germany feels this to be true, there can be no League of Nations in the sense intended by President Wilson. A League such as he desires must include Germany, and should include no nation that is not thoroughly convinced of the advantage and necessity of such a League, and is therefore not prepared to make the efforts, and, if need be, the sacrifices necessary to maintain it.

2. The second condition essential to the foundation and maintenance of a League of Nations is that the Governments and Peoples of the States willing to found it understand clearly that it will impose some limitation upon the national action of each, and may

entail some inconvenient obligation. The smaller and weaker nations will have rights that must be respected and upheld by the League. The stronger nations must forgo the right to make their interests prevail against the weaker by force: and all the States must forgo the right in any dispute to resort to force before other methods of settlement by conference, conciliation, or, if need be, arbitration, have been tried. This is the limitation.

The obligation is that if any nation will not observe this limitation upon its national action; if it breaks the agreement which is the basis of the League, rejects all peaceful methods of settlement and resorts to force, the other nations must one and all use their combined force against it. The economic pressure that such a League could use would in itself be very powerful, and the action of some of the smaller States composing the League could perhaps not go beyond economic pressure, but those States that have power must be ready to use all the force, economic, military, or naval, that they possess. It must be clearly understood and accepted that defection from or violation of the agreement by one or more States does not absolve all or any of the others from the obligation to enforce the agreement.

Anything less than this is of no value. How worthless it may be can be seen by reading the debate in the House of Lords in 1867 upon the Treaty guaranteeing the neutrality of Luxemburg. It was

there explained that we entered only into a collective guarantee; by this it was apparently meant that if any one of the guaranteeing Powers violated the Neutrality of Luxemburg, or even if any one of them declined to take active steps to defend it, Great Britain and the other guarantors were thereby absolved from taking any action whatever. This was contrasted at the time with the Belgian Treaty, which entailed a separate guarantee.

Hitherto the Nations of the world have made reserves in Arbitration or Conciliation agreements, showing that they were not prepared to accept the limitations upon national action that are essential to secure an effective League of Nations. An exception is the Conciliation Treaty between Great Britain and the United States negotiated before the war, but the statement made above is generally true.

The Nations have also carefully abstained from undertaking any obligation to use force to uphold the benevolent rules and agreements of general application that have been recorded at Hague Conferences; such obligation has been confined to local objects like the Neutrality of Belgium or to alliances between particular Powers made to protect or serve their special interests.

Are the Nations of the world prepared now, or will they be ready after this war, to look steadily and clearly at this aspect of the League of Nations, at the limitations and obligations that it will impose,

and to say whole-hearted and convinced as they have never been before, 'We will accept and undertake them'?

Individuals in civilized States have long ago accepted an analogous limitation and obligation as regards disputes between individuals; these are settled by law, and any individual who, instead of appealing to law, resorts to force to give effect to what he considers his rights, finds himself at once opposed and restrained by the force of the State—that is, in democratic countries, by the combined force of the other individuals. And we not only accept this arrangement, but uphold it as essential to prevent oppression of one by another, to secure each person in a quiet life, and to guarantee to each the greatest liberty that is consistent with the equal liberty of neighbours. That at any rate is part of the theory and object of democratic government, and if it is not perfectly attained most of the proposals for improving it look rather to increased than to diminished State control.

But in less civilized parts of the world individuals have not reached the point of view from which this order of things seems desirable. There is a story of a native chief in Africa, who protested to a British official against having to pay any taxes. The British official explained, no doubt in the best modern manner, that these taxes were used to keep order in the country, with the result that men and women and the flocks and herds and possessions of every tribe were safe,

and each could live in its own territory without fear or disturbance, and that the payment of taxes was for the good of all. The effect of this explanation was to make the chief very angry. Before the British came, he said, he could raid a neighbour, return with captives and captures of all sorts and be received in triumph by the women and the rest of his tribe when he returned. The need for protecting his own tribe from similar raids he was willing to undertake himself. 'Now', he said, 'you come here and tell me that I ought to like to pay taxes to be prevented from doing this, and that makes me mad.'

The analogy between States and individuals or groups of individuals is not perfect, but there is sufficient analogy to make it not quite irrelevant to ask, whether after this war the view held by great States of the relations desirable between themselves will be that of the African chief or that of individuals in what we call civilized Nations. Nothing but experience convinced individuals that law was better than anarchy to settle the relations between themselves. And the sanction that maintains law is the application of force with the support of the great majority of individuals behind it. Is it possible that the experience of this war will produce a settled opinion of the same sort to regulate the relations of States with each other and safeguard the world from war, which is in fact anarchy?

What does the experience of this war amount to?

Our minds cannot grasp it all. Thought is crushed by the accumulated suffering that the war has caused and is still causing. We cannot utter all that we feel, and if it were not that our feelings are in a way stunned by the very violence of the catastrophe, as physical nerves are to some extent numbed by great blows, the human heart could not bear up and live under the trial of this war. Great must be the effect of all this: greater after even than during the war on the working of men's minds, and on human nature itself; but this is not what I intend to urge here. I will urge only one point and one that is for the head rather than the heart.

We are now in the fourth year of the war: the application of scientific knowledge and the inventions of science during the war have made it more and more terrible and destructive each year. The Germans have abrogated all previously accepted rules of warfare. The use of poisonous gas, the firing from the sea upon open undefended towns, the indiscriminate bombing of big cities from the air were all introduced into the war by Germany. It was long before the Allies adopted any of these practices even as reprisals but the Germans have forced a ruthless and unlimited application of scientific discovery to the destruction of human life, combatant and non-combatant. They have shown the world that now and henceforth war means this and nothing less than this. If there is to be another war in twenty or thirty years' time, what will

it be like? If there is to be concentrated preparation for more war, the researches of science will be devoted henceforth to discovering methods by which the human race can be destroyed. These discoveries cannot be confined to one nation and their object of wholesale destruction will be much more completely achieved hereafter even than in this war. The Germans are not blind to this, but as far as I can see their rulers propose to avoid future wars by establishing the domination of Germany for ever. Peace can never be secured by the domination of one country securing its power and prosperity by the submission and disadvantage of others, and the German idea of a world peace secured by the power of German militarism is impracticable as well as unfair and abhorrent to other Nations. It is as intolerable and impossible in the world as despotism would be here or in the United States. In opposition to this idea of Germany, the Allies should set forth, as President Wilson has already set forth, the idea of a peace secured by mutual regard between States for the rights of each and a determination to stamp out any attempt at war, as they would a plague that threatened the destruction of all.

When those who accept this idea and this sort of peace can in word and deed speak for Germany, we shall be within sight of a good peace.

The establishment and maintenance of a League of Nations, such as President Wilson has advocated, is more important and essential to a secure peace than

any of the actual terms of peace that may conclude the war: it will transcend them all. The best of them will be worth little, unless the future relations of States are to be on a basis that will prevent a recurrence of militarism in any State

'Learn by experience or suffer' is the rule of life. We have all of us seen individuals becoming more and more a misery to themselves and others, because they cannot understand or will not accept this rule. Is it not applicable to Nations as well? And if so, have not Nations come to a great crisis in which for them the rule 'Learn or perish' will prove inexorable? All must learn the lesson of this war. The United States and the Allies cannot save the world from militarism unless Germany learns the lesson thoroughly and completely; and they will not save the world, or even themselves, by complete victory over Germany until they too have learnt and can apply the lesson that militarism has become the deadly enemy of mankind.

May 11th, 1918.